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SUBJECT: "DOES DEMOCRACY MAKE YOU GAY?" AND OTHER BURNING QUESTIONS  
IN TAJIKISTAN

¶1. (U) Summary: Post's outreach program has provided an unprecedented opportunity for EmbOffs to reach out to Tajik youth under age 25, who comprise more than 50 percent of the population. These discussions have provided a window into the sheltered and increasingly conservative mindset of young Tajiks, and suggest that members the new generation generally do not feel empowered to make changes in their own society. End summary.

¶2. (U) Through cooperation with the Aga Khan Humanities Project, the Bactria Cultural Center and the Tajik State Pedagogical Institute, as well as regular events at American Corners and the Information Resource Center, EmbOffs have met with hundreds of Tajik high school and college students in the last four months. This largely English-speaking group represents the educated, urban elite. Many have studied or would like to study in the United States.

¶3. (U) The vast majority of students we spoke with were self-identified Muslims, and many fasted during Ramadan. However, when EmbOff asked students about the religious meaning behind fasting or observing holidays such as Eid-al-Qurbon, few students had an explanation. Ignorance of their religion was also apparent in a casual discussion about plural marriage, when EmbOff asked what the Koran said about this practice, and no student (out of about 50 present) could answer.

¶4. (U) In addition to lack of knowledge about their own religion, our young interlocutors seemed to know little about religions besides Islam, but were eager to learn. A discussion on the differences between Judaism and Christianity lasted nearly three hours due to detailed, specific questions by students. At the beginning of the talk, EmbOff asked for a show of hands of who had ever met a Christian or a Jew, and no hands went up. (Interestingly, many of these students have regular contact with non-Muslim expatriates living in Dushanbe.)

¶5. (U) Marital questions were among the most popular topics of discussion with EmbOffs, particularly among women. While expressing disdain for arranged marriages and polygamy, most students expected their parents to identify suitable spouses for them.

¶6. (U) No discussion topic seemed more mind-blowing to Tajik high school students than EmbOff's talk on gay and lesbian life in America at the Aga Khan Humanities Project. Project staff suggested the discussion as a way for students to "have their questions answered." Confronted with a wide range of viewpoints, EmbOff emphasized that all people deserve to live free of persecution based on their lifestyle. Questions focused on perceived "recruitment" by the gay and lesbian community, and included "does democracy make you gay?" -- indicating a lack of knowledge about life in open, Western

societies. Students were shocked to hear EmbOff had gay and lesbian friends. At the end of the discussion, the teacher asked the students to break into three groups and put on skits about what they had learned. In all three skits, a young Tajik came out to his parents, who burst into tears and expelled him from the family. One "father" had a heart attack and dropped dead.

¶17. (U) Iran is clearly on the mind of young Tajiks. During almost every politically oriented discussion with an EmbOff or American, students ask why the United States wanted to go to war with Iran. Qstudents ask why the United States wanted to go to war with Iran. The leading nature of the questions suggested the influence of Russian and Iranian television programs available via satellite.

¶18. (U) Students were reluctant to voice frustration with their own government, and when they did, they often asked EmbOffs what they should do about it. For example, after a lecture by the Resident Legal Advisor on the U.S. legal system, students asked him how they could change their own legal system to make it more fair. Whenever EmbOffs suggested they address their government on these issues, they did not seem to know how to begin.

¶19. (SBU) Comment: Our recent interactions with young urban Tajiks suggest that this generation will be more conservative than their parents and, having grown up during the civil war, reluctant to challenge authority. Almost all foreign views are filtered through Russian (and to a lesser extent Iranian) media. An intense focus on the family unit and fear of shaming it keeps young people from straying too far. As one NGO worker said, social capital is all most people have. All students are keen to study in the United States, which offers an educational lifeline to young people with few options in their own country, where the educational system collapsed after independence and five years of civil war. Educational exchanges and these interactions with EmbOffs are increasingly popular as Tajiks seek a broader world view and

struggle to define their role in their own society. End comment.

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